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March 28, 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. BUNDY

FROM: David Klein *PC*

SUBJECT: Post-mortem on Soviet Chaff Drops
in the Berlin Air Corridors

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In connection with the chaff drops in the Berlin air corridors, I have gone through all the pertinent written material to which I have had access and talked at length with officials of the several agencies concerned.

The results are not as conclusive as I would have liked. While the sins of omission are clear, it is difficult to come up with specific recommendations to assure that similar situations will not arise again.

These are the facts in the chaff case.

a. Chaff drops in the Berlin corridors have a long history. Reports of these incidents have been made to Washington through regular defense and intelligence channels. However, before March 14 of this year the individual reports were never collated.

b. Past drops occurred from early spring to late fall, coinciding with Soviet military exercises. This year, however, the drops coincided with the onset of the Soviet harassment campaign in the corridors. Both began on February 6. Consequently there was fuller reporting of the incidents and the reporting messages were given wider distribution than the usual intelligence reports. Therefore to many end users the chaff dropping was a new and different development.

c. The Soviet chaff drops of March 9, reported on the eve of the Secretary's departure for Geneva, were apparently of a very special variety and therefore of special interest. However, because of the nature of the information reported, this message received only the most limited distribution. In the Department of State it was only sent to the Secretary and a few selected officers.

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The officers regularly working on the Berlin air problem were not aware of the message or the contents before the Secretary's departure for Geneva.

d. The following day, taking cognizance of the March 9 chaff drops, General Norstad cabled back to the effect that "although chaff has been dropped by the Soviets on previous occasions, this particular incident, under existing circumstances, should be considered as a direct and deliberate offensive threat to the safety of flight".

e. And on Sunday, March 11, at their first meeting with Gromyko in Geneva, presumably with the March 9 report very much in mind, the Secretary and Lord Home protested not only the Soviet harassing air activities, but also the chaff drops which raised critical safety problems in the corridors.

f. The following Wednesday, March 14, at the request of General Gray (the JCS representative in the Berlin Task Force), and following a discussion of the chaff problem in the Berlin Task Force, DIA produced the report and tabulation (copy attached) which indicated that chaff drops in the corridors had a longer and more documented history than anyone had realized.

g. In commenting on the DIA report, General Norstad said he "had full knowledge of the patterns of previous Soviet chaff operations when he made his report and recommendations concerning Soviet chaff drops on March 9 and 13. He felt that because of the timing, nature, and especially the altitude of the drops, together with the status of Soviet actions in the corridors at that time, the drops of March 9 and 13 were significant and merited protest. . . Moreover, it would appear that these drops, coming at the time they did in relation to the disarmament conference, offered an excellent opportunity to protest Soviet actions endangering corridor operations and that such protests would have had good propaganda effect."

These essentially were the individual facts of the case.

The consensus is that the protests of the Secretary and Lord Home were necessary, useful and properly timed. Despite the history of the chaff drops, the fact is this activity is intended to disrupt our air corridor operations, and coinciding with recent Soviet harassing air activity in the corridors, creates serious safety problems that cannot go unnoticed.

However, the fact remains that at none of the critical points in the decision-making process leading up to the protest action was there evidence that anyone was fully aware of the history of Soviet chaff activity in the corridors. General Norstad in his message referred to the fact that he was aware of "drops on previous occasions". However, it seems fairly clear from his language that he too was not aware of the extent of these "previous occasions".

In reconstructing the events as they occurred, it seems quite clear to me that the first real awareness in Washington of the history of the chaff drops came as a result of the DIA report produced on March 14 at General Gray's behest. The officers in DIA with whom I spoke admitted that until that time they themselves did not have the full story although they had the detailed pieces of information that went into the preparation of the report. Certainly the Task Force did not have the full picture. And apparently no one else did.

The essential question then is where should the responsibility for producing such information rest? On whose initiative should it be produced? What assurances are there that the necessary information will be properly and promptly compiled in the future?

Organizationally, the staff responsibility for preparing the kind of information seems to rest clearly with the intelligence collecting agencies here in Washington. They receive the separate reports. They evaluate them. They are the only ones able to compile and synthesize the bits and pieces of information received. Moreover, they control the distribution of this material. Consequently, it would seem reasonable to assume that they are in the best position to produce the required information in a form and in time for decision-making.

This having been said, however, the fact remains that where critical problems are involved, the staffs of the policy-making officials have to take a critical look at the data furnished and ask the important questions before the final decisions are taken. This requires effective staff work in the agencies involved; and the point at which the questions are asked will vary from case to case, depending on the nature of the problem and the level at which decision-making begins.

In the case of the chaff drops there clearly were two unusual and perhaps mitigating factors - (1) the odd pattern of distribution of information because of the security problem, and (2) the obvious pressure of time. However the fact remains that the necessary staff work was not carried out as efficiently as it should have been in any of the agencies involved.

In this connection, it occurs to me that the President perhaps might want to discuss the question of staff responsibility - in its very broadest context - at his meeting on Friday with the desk officers of the Department.